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Support of Distance learning

Joint Appropriations-Education Committee

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I ask your **support for the \$900,000** in the Montana University System budget targeted for upgrading and expanding distance learning, the remote delivery of higher ed classes across this state.

This issue was initiated by the Shared Leadership efforts the past four years which were designed to encourage education to work more closely with economic development to build a stronger economy. Because of those efforts, distance learning in the university system has expanded significantly. It has also made the state's distance learning programs more efficient and they continue to improve as evidenced by the participation in these courses.

In 2001, 6% of the MUS students participated in one or more distance learning classes. This last fall, 11% of the students participated in such classes. Nationally, the growth has been similar. There was a 39% increase in online students in 2005 over 2004 and it's expected to grow about 31% over the next 5 years despite declining numbers of high school graduates during the same period.

The growth in the participation is very encouraging and demonstrates the importance of continuing to expand our distance learning opportunities in Montana. More importantly from a business or economic growth perspective, we must continue to make this investment because of the workforce training opportunities distance learning provides.

We've heard about the need for lifelong learning, a well-trained workforce and the continual training and retraining that businesses need to expand. Distance learning is our best and only statewide tool to do that.

The eight campuses of the university system presently offer online classes that are components of certificate programs, two and four-year degrees and even graduate degrees. That diversity is important to Montana employers as they continue to change and expand their businesses. It's critical for workers as they upgrade their skill sets and adapt to the changing businesses.

Online learning provides employees the opportunity to expand their skills at times and, more importantly, locations that are convenient to them. Employees across this state, not just those living near one of the eight campuses, want to take college-level classes. As the university system continues to expand its distance learning courses, that becomes more practical and more popular each semester.

It's easy to understand distance learning being very popular with the next generation of traditional college students entering directly from high school but don't overlook the importance of distance learning to workers across this state. It's a critical resource for them. It allows them to advance their employment skills in their present community and hopefully keep them in Montana longer than would be possible without such a training resource. It's a win-win-win for employees, businesses and the state's universities.

I ask your support for the \$900,000 for the distance learning component of the university system's budget request. Thank you.